

BETRAYAL OF A SACRED TRUST: A REVIEW OF NAMIBIA'S HISTORY

By

Renate Pratt

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This paper's title--"Betrayal of a Sacred Trust"--denotes its theme: I will focus almost exclusively on the conduct of Western states during the century of Namibia's colonial history. But before we look back to remind ourselves of the appalling and repeated rape of Namibia and Namibians by successive colonizing powers, I would like us to salute the courageous women and men whose overwhelming sacrifices in the struggle for a free Namibia are at long last rewarded.

It is no coincidence at all that Namibia was Africa's last colony. Unlike other former southern African colonies, Namibia had been totally integrated into South Africa's apartheid state. As a consequence, Western political, economic and military links with South Africa had become indistinguishable from those joining them to Namibia. Namibia's history therefore, is also the history of Western collaboration with apartheid South Africa. In other words, but for the support of a few progressive countries and a number of international organizations, Namibians have been on their own in their long struggle for freedom and independence. This remains true, as we shall see, despite appearances of periodic engagement by powerful Western states on behalf of Namibia.

Western governments have always found it easier to relate to the white colonial minorities than to the forces of black liberation. There is convincing evidence in recent history of Western unwillingness to give effective support to the struggle for fundamental changes in Southern Africa or even to recognize the legitimacy of these struggles until liberation is within reach and continued lack of support threatens to become a political embarrassment.

Neither the Portuguese in Mozambique and Angola nor the Rhodesians relinquished power until they were defeated by the

liberation armies. No support had been extended by Western governments to those fighting for the end of colonial rule. Independence of the two former Portuguese colonies was eventually accelerated by the overthrow of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974, an event itself closely related to the long years of costly colonial wars. It is true that mandatory economic sanctions were imposed on Rhodesia. However, their effectiveness was only partial, given the active support Rhodesia received from South Africa and the ease with which the sanctions could and were broken by major multinational companies. Rhodesia had nominally remained under British colonial rule. Nonetheless, Britain had refused to send its troops when white supremacists unilaterally declared their independence. It was not until the Rhodesian regime was militarily defeated in 1979 by Zimbabwean liberation movements, that Britain negotiated a framework for majority rule.

Cuito Cuanavale, a town in south east Angola will be remembered as the place where South Africa suffered its military defeat in May 1988. It represents the turning point in the long struggle for Namibia's independence. Under a scheme which involved on the one hand South Africa and UNITA (South Africa's surrogate forces in Southern Angola) and, on the other, U.S. military supplies delivered via an airstrip in neighbouring Zaire, attempts were made to capture enough Eastern Angolan territory to install a provincial UNITA government in Angola in order to ultimately defeat the government in power. The scheme failed. South Africa tried four times to take Cuito Cuanavale but had to retreat as the combined Cuban, Angolan and SWAPO forces were advancing south toward the Namibian border. The South African army was sustaining very heavy losses and in particular, was losing far more young white soldiers than would be safe politically to explain to their parents and wives who, in most cases were

kept uninformed about South Africa's military involvement in Angola.

The Americans recognized at once the finality of South Africa's military defeat. Chester Crocker, the undersecretary of state for Africa in the Reagan administration, advised with breathtaking audacity, "Military solutions have been tried and they don't work." Within a very short period of time, serious talks chaired by Crocker were under way between Cuba, South Africa and Angola, forestalling any further military advances toward Namibia by Cuban and SWAPO troops. South Africa for its part gained "a planned military retreat" and a strong negotiating position under the protective wing of the US chair. In 1990, two years after South Africa's defeat at Cuito Cuanavale, Namibians can begin to reclaim their birthright.

To appreciate the dimensions of the wrong done to Namibians, it is useful now to return to their early colonial history. This history demonstrates as well that South Africa's racism, oppression and exploitation have deep common roots among all former colonial powers.

Following the arrival of white traders and missionaries in the beginning of the 19th century, colonial high handedness began in earnest with the visit in 1868 of the British Commissioner from Cape Town. Ten years later Britain annexed the only natural deep-water port of Walvis Bay, which has remained the prized jewel--the gate-way to international trade--in this resource rich land. A few years later in 1884, the European powers divided the African continent among themselves at the Congress of Berlin. Namibia became a German colony, but grotesquely, Britain retained authority over Walvis Bay and its islands hundreds of miles away in South Africa. Namibians, for their part, experienced the brutal seizure of their country by imperial German troops who overwhelmed them and forced them off their lands which were soon occupied by German farmers.

The first national war of resistance lasted from 1903 to 1907 when Namibians fought for the return of their lands. The war ended in genocide. Extermination orders by the German commanders resulted in one of the worst massacres of Africa's colonial history. It reduced the Herero populations from 70,000 to 16,000 and the Namas from 50,000 to 20,000. Survivors were driven into the desert or were forced into prison camps; either way they starved to death. Decrees forbade Namibians henceforth to own cattle or to acquire land, leaving wage labour for whites as the only option of earning a livelihood.

During World War I, Namibians were dragged into this alien European conflict and had no choice in the exchange of their German colonial masters for South African troops when these, as England's allies, invaded and occupied Namibia in 1915. After World War I, the League of Nations was formed. In 1920, it conferred upon South Africa--on behalf of Britain--the mandate to rule Namibia.

The League's mandate was,

*a Sacred Trust to promote to the utmost the material and moral well-being and social progress of the people of [what was then called] South West Africa.*

The League's intentions had been laudable but its choice of custodian for this "Sacred Trust" could not have been more calamitous. South Africa used the inter-war years to consolidate its rule, making it clear that it regarded Namibia as part of South Africa. It created "reserves" for black Namibians and increased significantly the number of German and South African settlers. Black rebellions which occurred many times were brutally crushed. In 1925, a Legislative council was established for a white-only electorate.

When the United Nations had been formed following the Second World War, all territories which had been mandated by the League of Nations were brought under

the Trusteeship of the new world body. All, that is, except Namibia. South Africa declared that it did not recognize the United Nations to be the successor to the League of Nations and would therefore not relinquish its mandate. What is worth noting at this point and in the events that follow is not only South Africa's obduracy, but also the fact that although the Western powers were the principal drafters of the United Nations Charter, they closed their eyes to South Africa's blatant refusal to obey the rules of the new World body. The reason for this and for much that happened subsequently, lies in the--for Namibians--unhappy combination of facts: the natural fraternity of white, non-Communist Christian rulers and the presence of immense mineral wealth, including diamonds in the Namibia desert, which post-war Western capital was ready to exploit.

It is therefore not surprising that these same states which were the founding members of the United Nations, remained unresponsive to the many petitions and appeals which from 1949 on were submitted by delegations of black Namibian nationalists and their supporters. They had great confidence in the lofty ideals of the United Nations regarding the attainment of independence of former colonies and hoped for its intervention on their behalf to end South African rule. But instead, between 1954 and 1968, the international community tolerated South Africa's administrative integration of every aspect of Namibian life into its own system of apartheid. The same South African and international economic interests, which were benefitting from South Africa's natural wealth under apartheid conditions, were attracted as well to mineral-rich and agriculturally promising Namibia under the same laws and conditions. We should note that during this period of direct South African rule, the port of Walvis Bay and its island were administratively returned to Namibia.

As black Namibians entered the final quarter of their harrowing colonial

century, they found that they were no longer without political partners. In 1966, Namibian nationalists with the aid of newly independent Third World States, finally convinced the United Nations General Assembly to terminate South Africa's mandate for Namibia. Canada voted with the majority of state members in support of this important resolution. South Africa, however, refused to comply and remained in defiant occupation of the territory. It was at this point, when all peaceful and legal recourse had failed to dislodge South Africa from Namibia, that SWAPO, the South West African People's Organization, decided that there was no longer an alternative to the armed struggle. Canada never officially recognized the legitimacy of the armed struggle and in 1973, refused to vote in favour of granting SWAPO observer status at the United Nations.

Although Canada along with other western states had supported the termination of South Africa's mandate, none took action concerning their commercial enterprises which had contractual relations with a regime that was from then on illegal. A year later, the United Nations transferred authority for Namibia to the newly established United Nations Council for Namibia. Canada opposed this transfer and abstained from voting for it. Canada and most Western powers have recognized the Council for Namibia only in its limited educational role. By not supporting the Council's authority over Namibia and by not providing an alternative, the Western powers left Namibia without a political and administrative home in the United Nations system or anywhere else. Implicitly thereby, they acquiesced in South Africa's continued occupation while rhetorically deploring it.

The reasons for the unwillingness to give authority for the Namibian mandate to a United Nations body were fairly obvious. Important Western-based resource industries had meanwhile established themselves in Namibia. The giant Rossing Uranium mine, to give but one example, with interests from Britain, France,

Canada and South Africa, had obtained mining rights in 1966, the very year South Africa's mandate to grant such rights had been terminated. More than that, the mine's development had been facilitated by major long-term uranium contracts offered by Britain, France, West Germany, Japan and others. Canada's Crown corporation, then Eldorado Nuclear Ltd. (now merged with the Saskatchewan Mining Corp. and called CAMECO) was to become one of the first stage processors of Namibian uranium before re-export for further enrichment in the USA and Europe. None of these powerful stake-holders in Namibian resource extraction were ready to press for Namibian independence in more than rhetorical terms.

Recognition was increasing in the early 1970's, that economic activity by foreign companies constituted a serious impediment to the termination of South Africa's continued illegal occupation. Taking a series of steps in 1970 and 1971, the United Nations Security Council and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) each confirmed the illegality of South Africa's presence in Namibia. United Nations Security Council Resolutions 276 and 283 explicitly asked states to end commercial, industrial and investment activities in Namibia by their state-controlled companies; to withhold government loans, credit and other forms of financial support from other companies involved in trade and commerce with Namibia and to discourage companies from investing or from obtaining concessions in Namibia. The ICJ's advisory opinion of 1971 placed responsibility for Namibia in the United Nations. It declared that South Africa's conduct in Namibia constituted a denial of fundamental human rights and that it was in flagrant violation of the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Five years after South Africa's right to rule Namibia was terminated and only after the Security Council had endorsed the World Court's advice, did Canada inform South Africa that it no longer recognized its authority over Namibia. Canada, however, did not heed the World

Court's advice and ask Canadian companies to remove their interests from the territory. The government explained--rather disingenuously at the time--that withdrawal of these interests was not obligatory because the Security Council resolutions lacked mandatory language. Thus, Canadian and other Western companies continued to extract and export Namibia's non-renewable resources under concession and licenses from its illegal occupant. What is more, Revenue Canada never stopped allowing Canadian companies in Namibia to deduct from their Canadian tax, taxes paid to the illegal regime in Namibia defying the World Court's advice.

Reassured by the apathy of major Western powers to its continued illegal occupation of Namibia, South Africa reacted to Angola's independence in 1974 by building up military bases and amassing South African troops in Northern Namibia. At the same time it moved to prepare for so-called elections in Namibia by nurturing political groupings in the bantustan-like structures which the regime had established.

On the other hand, the UN Council for Namibia became increasingly alarmed by Western foot-dragging over Namibia and hoped to put a stop to the rapid depletion of Namibia's non-renewable resources. Thus, also in 1974, it enacted Decree No. 1, which required the permission of the UN Council for the exploration, mining, processing, selling or exporting of any Namibian resource. This was of course precisely the kind of initiative of the Council which Western industrialized states had sought to prevent in 1967. Canada, along with the others reminded the Council at once that they did not recognize its authority to issue such decrees. But neither did they take measures of their own to protect Namibia's resources from the exploitation by their companies.

Meantime repression and military build-up increased apace in Namibia leading to martial law, states of emergency and mass arrests of SWAPO members and sympathizers. International frustration

with South Africa's defiance grew. Following South Africa's invasion of Angola in 1975, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 385 in January 1976. It unanimously condemned South Africa's illegal and continued occupation of Namibia, denounced its brutal repression and military build-up and demanded free elections under United Nations supervision. South Africa's immediate refusal to comply gave rise to a series of actions by powerful Western states which prolonged for a decade and a half the war in Namibia, the killings, torture and subjugation of Namibians and caused thousands of deaths and mutilations among Angolans along with widespread devastation of their land and infrastructure. These actions also prolonged the international pillage of non-renewable Namibian resources.

The sequence of events was this. In 1977, South Africa officially refused to leave Namibia. Nonetheless, it took the precaution to again change the status of Walvis Bay by re-annexing the port and its islands to the Cape Province. South Africa also appointed a South African Administrator General, a move that at least acknowledged Namibia's status as a separate jurisdiction which, South Africa said, it would prepare for UN-supervised elections. Such actions, however, did not at all appease progressive member states of the United Nations. They continued to press the UN Security Council to impose mandatory, economic sanctions against South Africa to force its removal from Namibia. This was the moment for Canada's most serious engagement in the Namibian issue. Together with West Germany, Canada had been elected as non-permanent member of the Security Council starting with the January 1977 UN Session. Thus at this crucial time, Western Permanent members of the Security Council, the USA, Britain and France united in their opposition to economic sanctions against South Africa, were joined for two years by two non-permanent members who shared completely not only their position on sanctions but also their commercial and geo-political

interests in South Africa. Canada took the lead in proposing an alternative to the awkward prospect of continuing debates about South Africa and Namibia and the exercise of repeated Western vetoes in the Security Council over demands for sanctions against South Africa.

Canada argued vigorously and successfully against sanctions and was instrumental in the establishment of a five member "Contact Group of States" which promised to obtain South Africa's cooperation in an internationally accepted settlement for Namibia. Members of the Contact Group were of course Britain, Canada, France, West Germany and the USA. They said that negotiations rather than sanctions would bring an early end to South Africa's illegal rule in Namibia. Given the power and prestige of the Contact Group, Namibians and Third World countries—including in particular Southern Africa's Front-Line states--agreed to postpone their demand for sanctions and gave their support to the Contact Group initiative. Canada also played a major role in the preparation of and negotiations about detailed proposals, which called for a phased withdrawal of South African troops, a cease-fire between SWAPO and the South African army, and the holding of free and fair elections under UN supervision and control. By April 1978, some modicum of agreement seemed to have been struck even with South Africa.

While the contact Group was in New York meeting with SWAPO in early May 1978, South African paratroopers launched a massive attack on Kassinga, one of SWAPO's larger refugee camps in Angola, murdering more than 800 Namibians--mainly women and children. This incredible act of South African wanton brutality was clearly intended to cause SWAPO to withdraw from any negotiated solution for Namibia and thereby derail the efforts in progress. South Africa has never been chastised or punished for these mass murders; certainly the Contact Group did not pause to wonder whether South Africa was negotiating in good faith. SWAPO

eventually accepted the proposals of the Contact Group while South Africa announced nine days before the meeting of the Security Council that it was withdrawing its support. The Contact Group Proposals were nevertheless adopted as UN Security Council Resolution 435 on September 29, 1978.

South Africa for its part, had in mind to hold internal tribally-based elections in Namibia and to present the United Nations with the fait accompli of an internal self-government which would exclude SWAPO. In October '78, an unusually high-powered diplomatic mission of foreign ministers from the Contact Group went to see the new South African Prime Minister, P.W. Botha, in an unsuccessful attempt to change his mind about the internal Namibian "elections" and to win him over to Resolution 435 or at least to negotiations about it. P.W. Botha refused both appeals and made only vague promises about resuming negotiations sometime in 1979, but only if Namibia's so-called "internal leaders" were participating. This humiliation of senior members of the Contact Group by an off-hand South African prime minister, stinging as it must have been, was not enough for a public admission of defeat. It would have sparked off renewed calls for sanctions, and the Contact Group had been established in 1977 with the express purpose to prevent sanctions. So the foreign ministers put on a brave front. Allan MacEachen, then Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, said that he remained "obviously optimistic" describing the South African visit as: "This is a significant breakthrough"(!) Other foreign ministers were equally sparkling, speaking of the visit as "this unique diplomatic achievement" that was of "profound significance for Southern Africa as a whole" (British and German).

For P.W. Botha, listening to such self-congratulatory hyperbole of his international visitors, there could only be one explanation: he had nothing to fear from these senior Western politicians. Resolution 435 had been

betrayed by its architects within a month of being adopted.

New attempts were made in 1979 and 1980 to win South African acceptance of 435, and in the process the original terms were whittled away as South Africa put forward new objections and demands. Finally in January 1981, a pre-implementation conference was held in Geneva with the aim of signing a ceasefire between SWAPO and South Africa. SWAPO was willing to sign. South Africa, however, anticipating a friend in the incoming Reagan administration, wilfully scuttled the conference by including in its delegation members of the tribally-based internal self-government in Namibia.

The Contact Group had failed--it had failed to win South Africa's cooperation to bring Namibians to independence. The Contact Group had nevertheless achieved its actual goal: the long drawn-out negotiations, with a promise of success always just around the corner, had for 5 years prevented sanctions resolutions to come before the Security Council. When in April 1981, Canada's ambassador to the United Nations officially informed the Security Council about the failure of the Geneva conference, his most severe censure was reserved--not for South Africa for continuing its illegal occupation of Namibia--but for those who now called for sanctions against South Africa in the Security Council. Defying all logic, Ambassador Dupuy stated: "Such a course would probably put an end to the United Nations efforts and could indefinitely delay progress towards Namibian independence."

The Reagan administration certainly did not fail South Africa. Chester Crocker, the American negotiator on Namibia took the pressure off South Africa almost immediately by suggesting that it need not agree with the 435 implementation plan as long as Cuban forces were assisting the Angolan government. The new US administration held that Namibia's independence was no longer delayed by South Africa's illegal occupation; no,

from now on it was linked to the presence of Cubans in Angola. This simplified matters considerably for both the USA and South Africa. South Africa resumed its invasions and virtual occupation of large tracts of Southern Angola and augmented its military support for the UNITA rebel movement in the area. The US for its part entered into close relations with Jonas Savimbi, the leader of UNITA, and eventually began to supply him with substantial military aid. These moves had two objectives. First, it gave South Africa an entirely free hand in the administration of Namibia while the unauthorized depletion of Namibia's resources continued. Second, it obliged Angola to retain the Cuban forces for its protection against the South African invaders and against internal insurrection, thereby making it impossible for Angola to reduce the Cuban force. A further agenda item for both states was to force the Angolan government to accept in its ranks a role for UNITA.

America's interventionist approach on behalf of its own and South Africa's geopolitical designs for the region, eclipsed every other international effort to remove the South Africans from Namibia. Taken all together, Namibians have seen how western powers have deprived them time and again of whatever power and influence the United Nations might have been able to exercise on their behalf. Over the last fifteen years they have experienced first the Contact Group and then the USA wrest the initiative from the United Nations and subvert international law to serve western interests. Let us remember that it was in the pursuit of these objectives in 1988 that the South African army was defeated at Cuito Cuanavale. Only then did serious negotiations begin about the end of its illegal occupation in Namibia.

Independence Day has been set for the 21st of March when 106 years of unrelentingly cruel colonial rule are over. Namibians can begin to reclaim their birthright.